

Amendments to the Specification:

After paragraph [0020] but before "DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE INVENTION," please add the following new paragraph:

--Fig. 4 illustrates a method of populating and using an electronic account-owner verification database according to various embodiments of the invention.--

Please amend paragraph [0040] as follows:

[0040] A primary benefit of the above described account-owner verification database and associated population and inquiry schemes is that inquirers may determine if the identified person is authorized to transact on the presented account. **One exemplary method of populating and using an electronic account-owner verification database according to various embodiments of the invention is shown in Fig. 4.** Such a feature is particularly advantageous in non face-to-face transactions, such as telephone and Internet transactions, as merchants are provided with a method to authenticate the consumer and validate the transaction, thus, allowing consumer purchases directly from their WEB site. Verification of a valid account number, account status, and customer authentication prior to completing a WEB transaction will reduce the number of WEB returns, thereby reducing operational costs. Additionally, the account-owner verification database according to the present invention will enable better acceptance of E-Check payments, thus benefiting Internet Banks, third parties and retailers.